

Foreword

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Children develop more rapidly in the womb and during early childhood than at any other time during the human lifespan. This enables the young child to adapt proactively to the kind of world they are likely to live in. If the intrauterineⁱ and early childhood environment is safe and nurturing, the child's neuro-physiological structures and functions develop according to plan. All the child's energy for

growth and maturation goes into building body and brain, to forming relationships with loved ones, learning and exploring, and acquiring the knowledge and skills of their language and culture.

If these early environments are not safe or nurturing, alarms are set off in defence to ensure the child's survival. Physiological systems conserve nutrients when their supply is insufficient or unpredictable, creating the risk of later obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Babies withdraw when affection isn't available as consistently as young children need to feel safe, laying the foundation for insecure future relationships. Young children lose interest in exploring the world and asking questions when their caregivers don't encourage them, and in the face of danger and violence, infants become hyper-vigilant with raised stress levels that erode their future mental and psychological well-being.

Research over the last three decades has demonstrated beyond doubt that child and adult health, security and achievement are being formed from the moment life begins. The developing child is highly dependent on their environment and adapts to it, laying

down patterns of response that become entrenched as virtuous cycles of health and capability or vicious cycles of vulnerability.

In this cycle of life, there is no going back. Children born with challenges or into a challenging environment need support, and they need it quickly. Their best chances are all stacked in the first few years of life. Children can recover quickly and get back on the path to reach their developmental potential if they and their families get the help they need. As time goes by, difficulties grow because they build on each other. A small, sickly child may make fewer friends and learn less, they may get shouted at because they're slow, and their self-esteem may suffer. All these conditions worsen if the child goes to school later, is held back in class, is teased by others and has few supportive adults to turn to. Such accumulating problems get harder to overcome, more needs to be done to address them, at greater cost, and with diminishing possibilities for success.

This is why the National Development Plan recognises that the protection and promotion of the development of young children must be part of our vision for the society we want to live in. A good beginning, during pregnancy, birth and in early childhood lays the foundation for lifelong health, learning, productivity, and harmonious relationships with others.

A *South African Child Gauge* focused on early child development comes at a very auspicious time. The Diagnostic Review of Early Childhood Development (ECD) completed in 2012 was not only the first conducted under the National Evaluation Plan, but laid the foundations for work currently underway to develop both a national ECD policy and a national ECD programme. There is growing enthusiasm and commitment, around the world and in South Africa, for broad integrated approaches to giving all children a better chance to start well, especially those who are likely to face challenges along their way.

ⁱ Inside the womb or uterus.